

Learning: all together now

by the editors

While sometimes dismissed (or sometimes valued) for being an ivory tower, remote from the workaday world, higher education today is deeply imbricated with all aspects of society. The past few years have ramped up controversy and some turmoil especially around issues of racism and sexism, costs and funding, education for life and for employment. As teachers and writers in and around U.S. colleges and universities (and with some experience abroad), and as having been present in the Sixties, the current turmoil is familiar and welcome to us. Back then, the antiwar movement—ranging from anti-draft organizing to demands for a new foreign policy and from a growing anti-imperialism to an active GI and veteran support projects—was much broader and more effective than shown in the now-standard stock footage of the ‘68 Democratic convention police riot and the Kent State murder of peaceful student protestors. The now-neglected student movement of the times surged from Berkeley’s 1964 Free Speech Movement to the San Francisco State teacher-student strike for reforms serving a diverse working class student body. With momentum the student movement led to Teaching Assistant union organizing, student demands for a more diverse faculty and curriculum, as well as strikes, and black student athletes demanding racial justice. The parallels to recent campus actions are clear, though not exact. Sixties and early Seventies campuses were also the rich seedbed for the flowering of feminism, gay rights activism, ecology awareness, an anti-imperialist global perspective, and advancing the cultural understanding of racial and ethnic minorities. In fact, the New Left and partner movements developed a profound and rigorous analysis of U.S. life and politics, of what needed change, and tried to initiate grass roots progress.

Today on college campuses, the echoes of the Sixties have a different resonance. Then most celebrated action took place at elite schools and residential ones. Today “college” more clearly spans a much broader segment of the population with community colleges a more central part of the overall system, and a much more diverse student body especially at the tiers of public university systems. And the nature of the faculty has changed as well, with the majority of classroom teaching done by contingent faculty well off the tenure track. For decades industry has shredded its older models of apprentice training, the “volunteer” armed forces no longer work as a training pass-through for technical specialties, and robotization and automation have led to deskilling the work force which can then be moved wholesale offshore where assembly labor is prime.

Against this backdrop, neoliberalism has re-shaped US higher education (with similarities in the other parts of the industrial West). Today there are key trends which all contribute to a perfect storm with many countercurrents, riptides, and occasional aberrant tidal waves.

- Defunding state higher education while escalating tuition, fees, and services.
- Bloating administration with an expanding corporate model in which MBAs serve the central authorities and teachers and departmental autonomy are subordinated.

- Moving to an increasingly precarious workforce, especially in teaching.
- Increasing use of a retail consumer model for managing the student body
- Directly politically intervening in local affairs at public institutions, especially by governors, legislators, and wealthy donors.
- Corporate manipulating of curriculum fads such as MOOCs
- Directly attacking the humanities and most social sciences, and even STEM science regarding issues such as climate change

Thus we see a churn of issues, such as the upward spiraling costs for students who are pushed into debt-financing their education before entering the job market. And while there is a push to “restore” traditional education, and to enforce regimentation for the workplace, we have a different student body than the old norm. Demographic change, propelled by generational change, means campuses are much more diverse, racially and ethnically, as well as in terms of gender. Add to this the greater presence of international students, and students whose families represent different types and stages of immigration, and diversity itself looks different than a few decades ago. Neoliberalism and globalization have already changed the workplaces students will enter in the future. Rather than a future of lifetime corporate employment, or the stability of unionization, and the expectation of one person providing for a household, most students now face a “career” of precarious employment, endless retraining, and a high probability of losing ground.

We can reasonably expect that young people form an essential core for activist change. They have more hope, fewer binding commitments, more energy, and self-interest in seeking progressive change. When they can combine with deep rooted community resources and experience, they are virtually unstoppable, as the recent progress in exposing (though not ending) police shootings, racial profiling, and militarization. In addition, young adults acting according to changing social norms and expectations, we’ve witnessed on campuses in particular their politicized focus on issues of race and diversity, of sexual assault and gender equality. For example, when the federal education act was originally passed in 1972, the main effect of Title IX in assuring gender equality for women in high education turned on funding for women’s athletics. And so it remained for many years, but highly publicized incidents of sexual assault in the military came to command attention in Congress (and significantly brought forward by women legislators, now a larger presence on the national stage).

With a federal standard set against sexual assault and harassment in the military, and in government, it became obvious and clearer that similar standards should be implemented in terms of schools receiving federal funding. Thus, while the now famous “Dear Colleagues” letter, from the Department of Education in 2011, announced a new level of scrutiny appeared rather late, once in place and after some beginning enforcement began in the Obama administration, the move gained a momentum, along with a new attention to diversity and bias issues (expanded to include wider gender issues of transgender, of expanded ideas of disability, and so on), This has been welcome for shifting attention to the issue and justice for those affected, yet Title IX compliance has been often hastily introduced and wildly uneven in effectiveness. At its worst, offices have been set up and policies created with little skill or nuance. Some programs were charged with creating policy and rules, and with carrying on investigations, as well as evaluating the results and judging the parties involved, and determining the punishments or rewards. With no checks and balances, due process was often truncated. New “Bias Assessment Response Teams” went off to examine individual complaints (on the positive side, all complaints had to be investigated), but without an equivalent “Common Sense Response Team” to provide level headed procedural process and stop some BARTs’ overreach into classroom content and attempts to police academic speech.

Compounding this, the vast expansion of social media communication created the

ability for blunt statement, rumor, and crude or false information to flow rapidly throughout a community. This combined with an increasingly polarized public space, itself exemplified by the Republican and right-wing decision to obstruct everything that Obama tried to do. It worked out in the 2016 Presidential electoral campaign, when pitched battles became more common. And with Trump providing cover, and his win unleashing the barking dogs of racism and sexism, a new level of confrontation appeared.

Two particular problems presented themselves and show the need for a more sophisticated way of thinking (and teaching) about the central issues. First is the nature of a flexible, evolving, and principled understanding of justice. The very definitions of racism, sexual violence, harassment, and appropriate responses have been changing. An interesting case study is captured in an article about a class two faculty taught about free expression and the First Amendment [Erwin Chemerinsky and Howard Gilman, “What Students Think about Free Speech,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 3 2016]. They quickly discovered that students had a different idea than they did about what the ground rules for public discourse should be. The professors realized that since the early 1990s, primary and secondary education has taken on the task of confronting bullying in schools. One positive result is that students are far less likely to enact or accede to bullying behavior. But the downside is that they are much more likely to want to shut down disagreeable discourse and action without thinking about the consequences for free speech and dissent. Thus they are likely to accept and even ask for institutional regulation of things they don’t like which ends up giving much greater authority to governing institutions and leaving its administrators unchecked.

At the same time, in response to some clear cut violations of protections for free speech on campuses, a rising chorus on the Right has agitated under the banner of a First Amendment absolutism to not just allow but in many cases to encourage extreme and hostile expression. Criticizing campus actions such as diversity education, ridiculing “safe spaces,” “trigger warnings,” and “microaggressions,” calling concerned students “special snowflakes,” and denouncing “political correctness” (not knowing that the very term originated in the New Left to mock left sectarians), Right wing pundits who have never been known to do anything about racism and sexism have wrapped themselves in the righteousness of the First Amendment. In most cases (with a few again obvious exceptions) upon investigation the situation looked different. Campuses have had “safe spaces” where students can gather with others who respect their bonds for decades: Hillel Foundations, campus churches, Muslim prayer rooms, Women’s Centers, Black Student Centers, and so forth. Most “trigger warnings” are already in place when instructors choose a course title and readings and screenings: History of the Civil Rights Movement in the US, Global Warming and the Arctic Environment, Pornography in the Media, Sexual Assault and Criminal Law, etc. and experienced teachers know how to moderate hot button classroom discussions.

The recent political campaigns pushed antagonisms and self-righteous bluster while encouraging bigotry, especially on the Right. We found one of the best commentaries on free speech core issues in a “campus report” from PEN America, “a nationwide community of more than 4,000 novelists, journalists, poets, essayists, playwrights, editors, publishers, translators, agents, and other writing professionals.” *And Campus for All: Diversity, Inclusion, and Freedom of Speech at U.S. Universities* does a beautiful job of balanced explanation and suggesting paths to better solutions. And it’s available as a free PDF download from pen.org.

One of the legacies of the Sixties that is worth remembering, preserving, and creating anew is to critique and improve education. The inexorable trend of neoliberalism is to deny the social, the commons, the interdependence of our lives. Neoliberalism needs to force autonomy on people, claiming to celebrate individuals and choice, but only for the purpose of turning a profit, as with all the

variations of soft drinks or shampoos for consumers. When students are viewed as just consumers, schools become marketplaces. When college is treated as just a pipeline to an existing corporate –defined job, genuine education is replaced with sterile certification.

But the Sixties saw the creation of alternatives: of student generated courses; of free universities; of alternative gathering places such as churches and coffeehouses (including significantly, GI coffeehouses during the war); of study groups; of organizations for social, cultural, and political change that ran internal education as part of their activities; of bookstores featuring black, latino, women's, gay, leftist writing; of artist-run art galleries; performance and screening venues and series programmed from grassroots interests. The collective aspects of cultural projects, both among those organizing events and serving a community audience, are invigorating. Cultural space works against the competitiveness and isolation of individual cultural bubbles. A broad and diverse cultural sphere projects an alternative and utopian vision. That's the groundwork for real learning, learning together, in dialogue, for change.

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[To top](#) [JC 57](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



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